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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 KINSHASA 000081

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SUBJECT: ASSEMBLY PRESIDENT KAMERHE PLANS AMBITIOUS AGENDA

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¶1. (C) Summary. National Assembly President Vital Kamerhe has plans for an ambitious legislative agenda, close oversight of the other branches of the government, professionalization of the Assembly's work and a program of parliamentary diplomacy. He plans to call a special session in late January to address pressing issues in the absence of a formal program from the as-yet-to-be appointed government. He expects the majority AMP coalition to shrink once ministerial appointments are announced. His priorities also include creating space for a Congolese political opposition. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Congolese National Assembly President Vital Kamerhe and the Ambassador reviewed the role of the Assembly and Kamerhe's priorities for it January 9 in Kamerhe's first official meeting after formally taking office January 8 (reftel). Political counselor and a Kamerhe aide sat in as notetakers. Kamerhe was expansive and articulate; it was clear, even in his first full day in office, that he had put a great deal of thought into his plans for the future, speaking in depth from previously-prepared handwritten notes.

¶3. (SBU) Discussion focused principally on topics encompassed by four general objectives Kamerhe has set for the Assembly: writing legislation, providing oversight, raising professional standards, and initiating a program of parliamentary diplomacy. Discussion also returned at several points to the role of the political opposition.

Legislation

¶4. (SBU) Kamerhe emphasized that Congolese law needs to reflect the reality of the country today. He described an ambitious legislative agenda that includes reform of laws governing the mining sector, parastatals, services, infrastructure and governance, and creation of statutes addressing decentralization and the formation of national institutions, e.g an electoral commission and a constitutional court.

¶5. (SBU) Kamerhe described a collegial and team-based approach he would take to implement this agenda. He said he had asked the Assembly's first vice president, Christophe Lutundula, to put together a proposed legislative program. He also described plans to put the expertise of National Assembly deputies to use on particular projects. He said that a "grand reform" of a 1978 statute governing corporations is needed to help bring Congolese parastatals and investors together, and that he will assemble a team of

deputies from the legal profession to address this. He stated that he planned to bring together another experienced team to include the Assembly's at least 10 former interior ministers to review the issue of decentralization.

¶6. (SBU) The Ambassador agreed that Congolese public enterprises are in need of profound reform, noting that parastatals have traditionally been used as political prizes for supporters of the government. He observed that most parastatals are now either bankrupt or inert, although many, such as those responsible for transportation infrastructure and electricity, are essential for the functioning of the country. Kamerhe agreed, and said the system had developed basically as a way to reward Mobutu's cronies.

¶7. (SBU) The Ambassador observed that the Assembly can play a role in ensuring effective reform of the security sector. He noted a lack of technical expertise among the deputies on military matters, as well as on economic, budget and financial issues. He posed the question of what the IMF and other international partners could do to assist deputies, citing seminars being provided by the National Democratic Institute as an example.

¶8. (SBU) Kamerhe said the Assembly would be organizing some eight or nine committees to deal with economic and social, legal, environment, security and other issues. He said he has asked deputies for their committee preferences, which Lutundula will consult in drafting an organizational proposal. He emphasized the need to have qualified members on all committees. He agreed that few deputies were familiar with military issues.

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¶9. (SBU) The Ambassador cited the justice sector as another area in need of reform. He said that the first question raised by many potential American investors is how well the justice system works. Kamerhe agreed that reform of the sector is essential, especially if it is ever to be able to sanction government officials.

¶10. (SBU) The Ambassador observed that the Assembly will have to debate and approve essential components of the new government's program, noting that the longer it takes to form a government, the greater the consequences. Kamerhe said that he planned to call a special 30-day legislative session later in the month -- subsequently announced to begin January 26 -- to enable the Assembly, among other objectives, to address pressing budgetary issues.

Politics

¶11. (C) Regarding the Assembly's current makeup, Kamerhe said he expected changes in both the AMP and UN coalitions. He said the AMP needs to modify its current setup, in which every small party expects some share of power. He said he had spoken with both President Kabila and Prime Minister-designate Gizenga about ending the idea of comprehensive power-sharing and to instead emphasize competence over affiliation. He predicted that once the government makes its ministerial choices, the number of AMP deputies would probably fall from 332 to "stabilize" at around 270, and that many within the PPRD would be unhappy as well. He said that Jean-Pierre Bemba's UN coalition faced the same problem, but was in a more difficult position, implying that its opposition status provided it with fewer options.

Oversight

¶12. (SBU) Speaking for the Assembly as an institution, Kamerhe said, "We need to change the views and behavior of officials of the government." He assured the Ambassador that the Assembly would not give the president or the prime

minister a free pass under his leadership. He proposed regular evaluation of ministers, and said he had raised with Kabila the idea of doing so every three months.

¶13. (SBU) Kamerhe noted that many officials had grown rich during the Mobutu era, and stressed the importance of being able to present the population with examples of good governance. He called for emphasizing service to the people and creating a true republican opposition able to remind the government of its responsibilities. He promised that the Assembly would not hesitate to convoke or sanction ministers.

¶14. (SBU) The Ambassador agreed on the importance of a break with the past. He stated that the greatest challenge for Congo under the new constitution is to create a different image of the Parliament and government institutions. He said many if not all Congolese are cynical about politics: it appears to them simply as a means of getting rich.

¶15. (SBU) The Ambassador said that deputies need to maintain a dialogue with their electors. He also raised the issue of the Assembly's relations with the executive branch, pointing out that it is possible for a legislature to exercise effective oversight of the executive -- even when both branches are controlled by the same party.

¶16. (SBU) Kamerhe agreed that the Congolese population was skeptical about politicians. He noted the importance of demonstrating that there had been a "great institutional revolution." He agreed that the Assembly's greatest challenge will be demonstrating its independence.

Professionalization

¶17. (SBU) Kamerhe made a call for professionalizing the Assembly. He called it "valorizing the institution." He said that deputies -- not only ministers -- should be subject to oversight. He was frank in acknowledging the inexperience of many deputies. He cited the need for training, and proposed creation of a small group of experts to assist them. He also stressed professional working conditions, proposing construction, with Congolese and foreign funds, of a building to permanently house the Parliament and provide members with offices, staff and computers.

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Parliamentary diplomacy

¶18. (C) Kamerhe said he was launching a "parliamentary diplomacy" initiative aimed at reinforcing cooperation with other national legislatures. He said it would initially focus on Congo's neighbors, and cited Rwanda as its first target. He stressed resolving bilateral issues as a means of ensuring peace in the region. He also envisioned a role for the Assembly in facilitating cooperation with international partners on investment. He highlighted Congo's natural resources, citing its forest, hydroelectric and mining sectors, and lamented that the country was formerly a net exporter of many products it now imports. "We have major work ahead of us," he said.

¶19. (SBU) The Ambassador noted that it would be in the Assembly's interests to maintain an active dialogue with key international partners represented in Kinshasa as well. A formal structure along the lines of the Transition Mixed Commission is not required, nor even likely desirable, but the Assembly President may want to consider hosting regular informal consultations with a select group of resident Ambassadors. For example, when the Assembly has completed work on its committee structure, the Assembly President or Executive Bureau could invite a group of Ambassadors to whom they could present and explain the new Assembly's structure

and work program and initiate an ongoing dialogue.

¶20. (SBU) Kamerhe expressed interest in the idea and said he himself had been thinking about monthly meetings along similar lines. He also noted that the chairmen of the Assembly's committees, once selected, would meet with representatives of the diplomatic community.

Political opposition

¶21. (C) The discussion returned at several points to the question of the political opposition. Kamerhe said he was working to carve out a significant role for the opposition in the Assembly. He said that the many MLC and RCD votes he received in his run for Assembly president showed that the majority and opposition can work together. He regretted however that not enough members of his own coalition had agreed to support the MLC's Thomas Luhaka in a deal Kamerhe had attempted to broker for the office of second vice-president.

¶22. (SBU) The Ambassador noted that there are different ways to encourage opposition participation. He cited as an example committee rules in the U.S. Congress which provide a ranking member from the minority party with certain rights and privileges. He emphasized that the opposition can have political influence even without being in power. He noted that coalitions were themselves not monolithic and accommodated different points of view. The key is to ensure that opposition members have a full and fair opportunity to participate in the complete range of Assembly work, and contribute to preparation of legislation.

¶23. (C) Kamerhe noted the absence of long-time opposition party UDPS from the Assembly, and said he was trying to work out a formula to bring it into the political process. He said that the UDPS had been a traditional haven for political malcontents. He said both Kabilia and the Assembly must demonstrate to the UDPS heartland in the Kasai provinces that they represent all the people of the country. He called UDPS leader Etienne Tshisekedi's decision to opt out of elections "a great stupidity."

¶24. (C) The Ambassador noted that the UDPS must resolve some internal questions before joining the political process. He noted that while Tshisekedi is finding it difficult to adapt to the new political landscape, others in the party understand the need to act differently. He said the underlying issue is that many Kasaians have been left out of the political process by following the UDPS lead. It would seem that the key problem was not necessarily UDPS party representation per se, but rather ensuring that the large number of Kasaians who had opted out of the elections felt a stake in the DRC's new political institutions. This would require national authorities, to include specifically Assembly members and officers, to reach out to this constituency, and ensure that Kasai needs and interests were being addressed along with those of other parts of the country.

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Comment

¶25. (C) Kamerhe is one of the hardest players in Congolese politics, with a reputation of stopping at nothing to gain his ends. How he decides to use these abilities in dealing with a relatively inexperienced Assembly and a political class unused to legislative oversight will go a long way in determining whether the Assembly emerges as a disciplined, effective legislature capable of fulfilling its constitutional role. He also has the advantage of being close to President Kabilia. Kabilia speaks with Kamerhe very regularly, and is said to be more comfortable with Kamerhe than almost all others in his circle of advisers.

¶26. (C) Thus far it appears Kamerhe is aware of and sensitive to his image as a relatively unpopular hard-line partisan. His public statements since election to the Assembly, and those in this meeting, have been carefully tailored as statesmanlike, and relatively non-partisan, all in stark contrast to the past. He is clearly attempting a makeover in his image, and perhaps basic style, but it is too early to judge the success of that effort. End comment.

Biographical information

¶27. (U) Begin biographical information:

Vital Kamerhe, a member of the Bashi ethnic group, was born March 4, 1959 in Bukavu, South Kivu. He was educated in Bukavu, Goma, Kasai Oriental and Kasai Occidental before completing secondary school in Bandundu with a diploma in mathematics and physics. He earned a masters in economics with distinction from the University of Kinshasa in 1987, and taught as a junior lecturer there for 10 years.

He first became involved with politics in 1984 with the UDPS. His government experience includes positions in numerous ministries, including counselor to Prime Minister Faustin Birindwa in 1993, counselor and in 1994 chief of staff for Higher Education Minister Mushbekwa, and director of administration and finance of the National Service organization. Although initially opposed to the regime of Laurent Kabila, he had become a strong supporter by the time of the 1998 rebellion. Kabila named him to the government negotiating team for the 1999 Lusaka Agreement, and appointed him deputy commissioner-general for MONUC in 2000. He was the government's commissioner-general for the follow-up to the peace process.

Joseph Kabila appointed Kamerhe information minister in June ¶2003. A co-founder of the PPRD, he left the transitional government in July 2004 to succeed Chikez Diomu as its secretary-general. He was elected to the National Assembly

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in July 2006 and as its president in December 2006.

Kamerhe is a close adviser to Kabila and speaks with him regularly. He campaigned for Kabila in all 11 provinces during the 2006 presidential elections and is credited with contributing to his strong showing in eastern Congo.

Kamerhe is married to Mamie Keboli and has eight children. He speaks French and all four of Congo's official national languages: Kiswahili, Lingala, Kikongo and Tshiluba.

End biographical information.

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